2018

When This You See, Remember Me: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and World War I Monuments

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Notes:
Alyssa M. Mertka won the second place in the Humanities: Critical Research category.

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The names stretched out in an endless line. I tried to read them individually, but I was soon overwhelmed by the sheer number of them. Rows and rows of Edwards, Charlies, and Johns blurred together into a massive wall of text, bloated with tragedy. I began to walk along the length of the memorial, reading any name my eyes happened to fall upon. I tried to envision each name as a young man, full of life, who went off to war and never came back. As I walked, I noticed mementos left along the wall by visiting family members, friends, or visitors who simply wanted to make a gesture of remembrance for those who gave their lives. Flags, flowers, and photographs leaned carefully against the wall of names. I did not speak, but ran my fingers gently over each carved letter as I thought about the awful cost of war.

One would expect this scene to have occurred at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, but it was actually an experience I had while visiting the Ring of Remembrance at the Notre-Dame-de-Lorette International Memorial in Ablain-Saint-Nazaire, France. The Ring was opened in 2014 to celebrate the beginning of the centenary of World War I, fought from 1914-1918 ("The Ring of Remembrance"). I visited this site of memory, along with many other significant battlefields, monuments, cemeteries, and memorials associated with the First World War on a trip to Europe in 2018. Visiting those sites while concurrently taking a course on Vietnam film led me to consider the various connections between the two wars.

At first glance, the Vietnam War and World War I could not be more dissimilar. They were fought on different continents decades apart for vastly different reasons. However, by examining the two wars through the lens of their monuments, striking similarities appear between them. Comparing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to the World War I memorials that both inspired it and came after it reveal that at the heart of both wars was an enormous human cost and a resulting need for remembrance.

One of the most remarkable features of the Ring of Remembrance is its scale (Figure 1). It manages to fit the 579,606 names of the soldiers who died in the region of France known as the Nord-Pas-de-Calais onto 500 metal panels, each 3 meters tall and arranged in the shape of a ring (Rinaldi). The Ring of Remembrance, then, contains the names of ten times as many soldiers as are included on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which has 57,692 names inscribed on its surface (McLeod 383). It is important to note that the Ring is only for soldiers that died during several battles in one specific region of France, while the Vietnam Memorial is for those

killed or missing at any point in the war between 1959-1975 (“Design and Layout”). But mass war death in any context is tragic, whether the number of dead is 60,000 or 600,000.

Figure 1: A panoramic photo of the Ring of Remembrance in Ablain-Saint-Nazaire, France. March 14, 2018.

Maya Lin, the designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, remarked in 2000 that she was struck by the way World War I memorials dealt with death on such a scale. She writes of her realization:

> As I did more research on monuments, I realized most carried larger, more generalized messages about a leader’s victory or accomplishments rather than the lives lost. In fact, at the national level, individual lives were very seldom dealt with, until you arrived at the memorials for World War I. … I think … the listing of names reflected a response by these designers to the horrors of World War I, to the immense loss of life. (Lin 33)

The general trends mentioned by Lin were noticeable on my trip to France as I viewed such ostentatious pre-World War I monuments as the Arc de Triomphe (Figure 2). The Arc’s loud praise of Napoleon’s victory contrasted sharply with the more understated and egalitarian memorials such as the Ring of Remembrance. Furthermore, only the names of generals, not common soldiers, are inscribed on the Arc’s pillars. Such a monument like the Arc de Triomphe was no longer sufficient for such an event as the First World War; its clarion cry would ring hollow in the face of so much death, especially the death of the common soldier which came to characterize the war. In the same way, the Vietnam Memorial needed to break from the traditional modes of design because, in the words of the American Gold Star Mothers, “ideas about heroism, or art, for that matter are no longer what they were before Vietnam” (McLeod 388). How could a veteran bear to see “yet

Figure 2: The Arc de Triomphe in Paris, France. March 17, 2018.

another classically proportioned Prometheus" claim to represent him when he'd seen so many of his comrades die in twisted agony in the mud and rice paddies of Vietnam (Young 10)?

Instead of the tone-deaf praise of only those in positions of power who died, both the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Ring of Remembrance focus on the equal display of every single name of the dead, regardless of distinguishing factors such as age, race, religion, etc. To accomplish this goal, Maya Lin opted to list the names of the dead chronologically. The Ring of Remembrance, on the other hand, decided that the alphabetical approach was best. Each of these methods comes with its own implications. In Lin's design, men from the same company who fell in the same battle are more likely to be close together on the wall, therefore preserving their camaraderie forever. On the Ring's panels, Allied, Central, and colonial soldiers are placed side-by-side with no consideration for their place of origin. Their conflict, fought so many years ago, is dissolved in death. While collaborating with the Cooper-Lecky architectural firm on the actual creation of the Vietnam memorial, Maya Lin had considered the alphabetical approach for listing the names but rejected it because "a tally of how many Smiths had died made it clear that an alphabetical listing wouldn't be feasible" (Lin 34). Ironically, one of the most moving elements of the Ring of Remembrance is its three panels of Smiths, a reminder of just how many lives and families were destroyed by the War. Though the method for laying out the names differs between the two monuments, the memorials are virtually identical up-close, and the effect is the same for both (Figures 3 and 4). The viewer is left swimming in a sea of the dead and missing, grappling with the implications of each delicately-carved letter.

Figure 3: Names printed on the Ring of Remembrance. March 14, 2018.

Figure 4: Names carved into the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Totya).

Figure 5: The "gaping scream" of Thiepval. March 16, 2018.

Another name-centric World War I memorial was a direct influence of Maya Lin's design for the Vietnam wall: the Thiepval Memorial in the Somme region of France. The Thiepval Memorial was opened in 1932 and serves to commemorate the 72,000 British and South African soldiers who went missing and/or have no known grave on the Somme ("Thiepval Memorial"). Lin became enamored with Thiepval in college, where she once heard her professor describe the memorial as "a gaping scream" (Lin 34). The wide, rounded arches do resemble a mouth opened in shock or grief, and they provide clear views of the sky, countryside, and grounds of the cemetery (Figure 5). It is impossible not to be conscious of loss at Thiepval—the names of the missing stare down from every corner and the expanse of crosses lurks just through its stone portals. For Lin, this "awareness about loss" was both the most important part of the Thiepval memorial and the element that most influenced her design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (34).

An additional similarity between Thiepval and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is the inclusion of a process to update the memorial. When one is dealing with missing persons, there is still a possibility that a body will be located/identified eventually. Therefore, it becomes necessary to have a system in place to modify the list of names to reflect these new circumstances. Thiepval does this by merely striking the found soldier's name from the surface of the memorial. A small stone patch, clearly distinguishable from the surrounding area, indicates where a name once was (Figure 6). On the Vietnam wall, the status of the soldiers and any updates are conveyed via a system of symbols next to each name (Figure 7). A diamond indicates that the soldier died, and a plus sign means that the soldier is still missing. If new evidence or remains are discovered, a diamond can be superimposed over the plus sign to indicate that the soldier was confirmed dead, or a circle can be placed around the plus to indicate that a solider came back alive. This latter case, however, has never occurred as of 2018 ("Design and Layout"). By including these systems in the design of the memorials, both the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Thiepval Memorial demonstrate an active concern for the individual person, a concern that is consistent with each memorial's motivation to emphasize "individual tragedy rather than collective heroic death" (McLeod 389).

Figure 6: A name has been struck from the wall at the Thiepval Memorial. March 16, 2018.

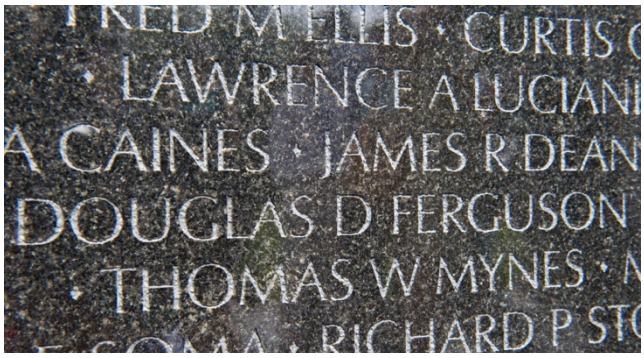

Figure 7: A system of symbols are carved next to each name at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial ("The Names").

These similarities between the Vietnam Memorial and World War I memorials are certainly helpful in understanding the ideas behind Maya Lin's controversial design, but they are even more significant for what they can tell us about the wars themselves. In Lin's own words, "The images of these [World War I] monuments were extremely moving. They captured emotionally what I felt memorials should be: honest about the reality of war, about the loss of life in war, and about remembering those who served and especially those who died" (33). The realities of both Vietnam and World War I were horrendously brutal. New methods of warfare, ambiguous motivations for fighting in the first place, and an encroaching sense of futility permeated both conflicts to the shock and chagrin of solider and civilian alike. These monuments reflect the new incomprehensibility that came with fighting a "total war" that ended with armistice or fighting a search-and-destroy war that ended in the United States' first loss. Through their simple representation of the essential tragedy of the wars—the loss of human life in overwhelming numbers—the Ring of Remembrance, the Thiepval Memorial, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial process the wars they represent in the only way that is sufficient: remembering the dead.

This need for remembrance in the aftermath of both wars reveals even more similarities between their monuments. A common feature of memorials of both Vietnam and World War I is the expression of collective, participatory remembrance. As previously mentioned, visitors to the Ring of Remembrance and almost any other World War I site (save the German ones, which is a conversation for another time) have a penchant for leaving mementos and scattering poppies (the British symbol of WWI remembrance) on every available surface (Figure 8). The Vietnam Memorial is also a receptacle for similar items, to such a degree that curators are employed to

take care of each object left at the Wall and a special exhibit is being planned to display many of them in the near future (Pager). (See Figure 9). Leaving small objects at memorials is part of a process which William Gass calls "souvenir[ing] ourselves," or in this case, souveniring those killed in war (127). Hats or teddy bears or poppies do not mean much in and of themselves, but when placed in the context of a memorial, they cry out, "[W]hen this you see, remember me!" (Gass 127). The hat calls to mind the person who wore it, the bear the child who hugged it, the poppy the man who died on flower-covered fields. Those who participate in this act of memorializing are simply trying to call again to mind those who have died, for fear of losing their memory to oblivion forever.

Figure 8: Flowers and a crucifix left at the Ring of Remembrance. March 14, 2018.

Figure 9: Flags and other items left at the Vietnam Veterans memorial (Gromelski).

Remembrance of World War I and Vietnam is also communal. One of the potentially negative aspects of Maya Lin's choice to list the names chronologically is how difficult it is to find a specific name, at least on one's own. Tom Carhart, a critic of her design, wrote in 1981 that the names were a "random scattering…such that neither brother nor father nor lover nor friend could ever be found" (McLeod 389). But the genius of this design is that in order to find a name, one must engage with other people. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial creates a community. Volunteers are happy to help visitors find certain names, and they often end up "shar[ing] grief with the visitors and discuss[ing] the wall's meaning with them" (McLeod 395). In the same vein, some of the most memorable moments of my WWI trip was watching people help each other look up relatives or ancestors in the books of names that could be found at every memorial. I watched schoolchildren with British accents and striped ties jostle each other for a turn at the book at the Menin Gate, a family rejoice together at finally locating the name of a

great-grandfather on the wall of Thiepval, and two young girls at Tyne Cot cemetery show their teacher a soldier who had hailed from their hometown. In all these instances, people interacted closely with each other and the memorials in front of them. Their interactions fulfill Maya Lin's vision of what a memorial experience should be: a "very intimate reading in a very public space, the difference in intimacy between reading a billboard and reading a book" (Lin 34).

Figure 10: Visitors examine the Ring of Remembrance. March 14, 2018.

But the Ring of Remembrance and Vietnam Veterans Memorial serve a purpose that goes beyond even remembering those who died or forming a community out of those who are left behind to remember. They are meant to serve as reminders to why the conflicts they memorialize should never be repeated. In a sense, they are both monuments, a word which derives from the Latin word *monere*, which means "to admonish, warn, advise, and instruct" (McLeod 396). The Vietnam Memorial performs its duty to warn by way of its juxtaposition between the Lincoln and Washington monuments (Figure 11). This location "forces visitors to wonder whether Lincoln's statue of contemplation at one end and Washington's monument of soaring aspiration at the other relate in any way to the deaths in the middle" (McLeod 396). In other words, are the ideals that Washington fought for and Lincoln extended compatible with how the Vietnam War was carried out? More importantly, should a war like this ever be fought again, at the risk of disappointing our stony-faced forefathers? The design of the Ring of Remembrance achieves a similar goal. Its ring balances precariously above the landscape, signifying that while the circle of unity holds for now, peace itself is tenuous (Figure 12). After the utter carnage and destruction of World War I, the world supposedly had learned its lesson. However, a mere twenty-one years were sufficient to erode even the boldest promises of "never again," as the world was plunged

into war once more. In its ominous design, the Ring of Remembrance seems to be saying that the world needs yet another, even stronger reminder of what could happen if the circle is broken.

Figure 11: The Washington monument, seen from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (U.S. Department of the Interior)

Figure 12: The Ring of Remembrance hovers over the French landscape. March 14, 2018.

Of course, differences do exist between World War I and Vietnam, namely how each war is remembered. Vietnam is marked by the tension between the suppression of painful memories and true remembrance. At the time the Vietnam Memorial design was being discussed, Tim O'Brien (author of *The Things They Carried*) commented on the American public's struggle to engage with Vietnam as it really was, rather as they wished it would have been. "It would seem that time and distance erode memory," he writes, "…We have forgotten, or lost the energy to recall, the terribly complex and ambiguous issues of the Vietnam War… We're all adjusted. The whole country… I wish we were more troubled" (McLeod 391). By this point in history, the 1980's, Americans had forgotten the elements of Vietnam that were more difficult to swallow and were content to remember only the parts that suited them. After the memorial was built, the people could confront the cost of the war and the pain associated with that truth. The wall, nevertheless, does not directly address such shameful realities of the war as the My Lai massacre or the execution of a Viet Cong prisoner by General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, for example, but this sin of omission is a fundamental flaw of monuments. William Gass argues that the "eternal flame should be fed flesh," if it is to accurately reflect the reality of war. However, a truly realistic monument would bring no comfort to the grieving or honor to the dead, and so monuments are forced to lie (Gass 140). The Vietnam Veterans Memorial may be one of the most popular monuments in Washington D.C., but it will never truly reflect Vietnam in all its convoluted, horrific reality, no matter how polished its surface.

Professor James E. Young argues in his book *The Texture of Memory* that the creation of monuments and memorials stems from the impulse to absolve oneself of the responsibility of remembrance by entombing the memory in stone. “For once we assign monumental form to memory,” he writes, “we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember. In shouldering the memory work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory burden” (Young 5). However, in sharp contrast to the relationship Americans have had with Vietnam, Europeans do not have the luxury of forgetting World War I. Every hundred meters seems to contain some sort of cemetery or statue. Bodies are routinely dug up in farmers’ fields or on the grounds of memorials—including the Ring of Remembrance, which had a sign honoring a soldier whose body was unearthed on its hill only in the past few decades. Signs warn tourists of the threat of unexploded ordinance (bombs and artillery shells left over from the war). With such omnipresent reminders, it’s nearly impossible to erase the Great War from memory in any capacity. Faced with this ubiquity, the European powers have decided on the whole to take control of the narrative memory of WWI. Today, most monuments, ceremonies, and memorials smack of the same determination to honor the dead above all else while still keeping in mind the horrors that those men endured in the trenches. The century-old wounds of World War I, unlike the still-stinging lashes of Vietnam, are more easily probed; therefore, remembrance of the war comes more easily and with more truth than memories of Vietnam.

The jungles of Vietnam and the mud-filled trenches of France objectively have little in common. But the wars fought in each location, the Vietnam War and World War I, share several similarities despite the many decades and thousands of miles between them. Over the course of each conflict, thousands upon thousands of young men lost their lives for causes that many in retrospect (and contemporarily) have deemed futile. In an attempt to come to terms with overwhelming numbers of dead, designers took to new, more individually-focused methods of memorializing the fallen. By comparing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to similar memorials for World War I, one can tease out the connections between one war and another. Communal and participatory remembrance post-war and the responsibility to prevent similar conflicts in the future are essential elements of both wars’ memorials. Though the actual narrative surrounding each war is different, the underlying hope for the remembrance of war is clear: that the memories of World War I and Vietnam, conveyed through their memorials, will deter the world from ever entering into such conflicts in the future. May there be no more walls of names.

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